

TO: Members of the Montana Senate Education and Cultural Relations Committee

FROM: Leslie Hiner, Vice President of Programs & State Relations
Foundation for Educational Choice

DATE: April 6, 2011

RE: House Bill 603 Public Charter Schools

Honorable Chairman Zinke and members of the Senate Education and Cultural Relations Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to submit written testimony regarding House Bill 603. HB 603 is a high quality charter school bill. When Montana joins the 42 other states in this country that have embraced charter schools and school choice, you will lead the nation with one of the strongest charter school laws. Legislators and citizens in other states will look to you as a role model for education reform.

In the 1990's I served as counsel to the Indiana Senate President Pro Tempore, then counsel to the Indiana House Republican Caucus and chief of staff to the Indiana Speaker of the House. During this time I assisted with the drafting, passage and implementation of Indiana's charter school law.

I understand the challenges you face in determining whether you should bring charter schools to Montana. We fought a tough battle for 7 years in Indiana before we were finally successful in passing our charter school bill. However, you are much better situated than we were in Indiana years ago. We made mistakes that you will not make. You have the advantage of passing legislation that has been vetted by 40 other states and modified over time based on actual experience. You are in a good position to pass quality legislation that will serve well the children and communities of Montana. HB 603 is that bill.

As legislators, some of the greatest obstacles you will face are opponents to this bill who will tell you, with confidence, that the sky will fall and public education will collapse if you pass this bill. This is not true. Some opponents in Montana are even calling this legislation dangerous. We heard these same old scare tactics in Indiana years ago. We even heard those scare tactics in

Indiana this year when we expanded our charter school law. Those claims arose even as the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University released a study showing strong results for charter schools in Indiana. "At a time where there is acute attention to quality in the charter sector, the charter schools in Indiana are proving to be a high quality option for students and parents," said Dr. Margaret Raymond, Director of CREDO at Stanford University.

As stated in CREDO's March 2011 report, "Compared to the educational gains the charter students would have had in their traditional public schools, the analysis shows that students in Indiana charter schools make dramatically larger learning gains." This report may be found at <http://credo.stanford.edu>.

A previous national study of charter schools conducted by CREDO was not as positive as Indiana's report. The simple lesson about charter schools is that charter schools will produce positive results for children if you pass a good law that will allow charter schools to thrive. Good charter schools also require strong leaders; Montana has no shortage of strong leaders. I fully expect that individuals in communities across Montana will examine the opportunity and if they find a need and have the desire to offer this educational option for their children, they will have the ability to be successful under the terms of this legislation.

In 2001 several friends and I developed a plan to open one of Indiana's first charter schools; I have served as chairman of the board of my charter school since that time. We built our charter school from a small kindergarten through grade 5 school serving 120 children who met in a church's Sunday school classrooms to a charter school grades kindergarten through grade 12 serving over 900 students in three separate and independent school buildings. Our charter school has made a profound difference in the lives of our students and the community.

Charter schools have the capacity to reflect the needs of the community. Montana, being a rural state, would probably see charter schools develop in much the same way that my charter school developed in Indianapolis. Whereas my school is located in Indianapolis, a big city, my charter school is located in a small community. This community faced problems of economic decline for many years, but perhaps the worst problem was the lack of quality schools. Young people would move into the neighborhood intrigued by old homes that they could renovate, but they would move as soon as they had children or as soon as their children reached school age. This created a transient community that was unable to sustain any positive growth.

When the opportunity to open a charter school arose, friends of mine in this community envisioned creating a school that would provide a quality college prep education for their children and encourage young families to stay in the community. We gathered knowledgeable people from several disciplines to serve as the first board and to construct a workable school plan. We had a former educator, an accountant, a nonprofit lawyer, a computer specialist, a

project manager, a private school expert, a scientist, and me, a legislative lawyer. We sought advice from numerous experts regarding special needs education, education law, nonprofit board development, financial planning and corporate budgeting. We sought input from all sectors of the community, including neighborhood associations and human service providers. We consulted with college professors regarding education services and curriculum development.

We wanted to add value to the community while providing a high quality education.

After we won approval from a charter school authorizer to open the school, we advertised the school in the community. The outpouring of parents and students eager to be part of this new school was overwhelming. We held a lottery because far too many students applied for admission than we could accommodate. We have had a lottery every year due to demand.

On the day of the first lottery, a young boy of 10 told me his story. He told me that his life was a total failure. He was a D-F student and he was in trouble in school every day. He had no friends because he was always in trouble. Teachers hated him and apparently so did his mother because she had abandoned him. He didn't know his father. He lived with his grandmother who also hated him because he was so much trouble. He told me that getting into my charter school was his last chance to start over and maybe go someplace where people wouldn't hate him.

This young boy also told me that he stayed up all night praying that he would get into my charter school. His prayers were answered that day.

Keep in mind that on that day, we did not have a school; we only had the promise of a school. We had no track record. We had no teachers. The only thing we offered that young boy was a chance that this school choice option might help him find success in life.

The day after our first lottery, a woman from the community whose child had just received a seat in our new school thanked me profusely. She informed me that she took down the 'For Sale' sign from her front yard. Now she could stay in the community and help it grow and prosper. She has been an active parent. She has been largely responsible for connecting the community to the school and as a result, the school has been a gathering place for the community.

A few years after we opened, a young girl of 10 finally won the lottery and was admitted to our school. She was autistic. She could not read, do math, or speak. She had been labeled as a child incapable of learning. After a few months at my school, she began to speak, read and do math. At her previous school she could only sit at the back of the classroom. Today she refuses to sit at the back of the class. She sits in the middle of the classroom and is taking advanced level courses. In a public hearing regarding the reauthorization of our charter, this woman's grandmother shared this story. She then said, "You gave my granddaughter a life."

This is the power of school choice. With charter schools, people who live in small communities can come together to create a great school for their children, or convert their existing public school to a public charter school. The school can be tailored to reflect the values of the community. The school can serve as a new opportunity for children to succeed. Children who were lost, or struggling, or abandoned can succeed. Children who are doing well in school can find a school where they can excel. A community can gather and thrive, united around a common vision of creating great educational opportunities of their own volition without the burden of a monopolistic education bureaucracy limiting those opportunities.

This positive, powerful story is what is happening in 42 states that have embraced school choice. Why not let Montana join this success?

Can this type of education success happen with a traditional public school? Perhaps, yet many traditional public schools face the obstacles of being part of a monopoly system where they are incapable of being truly independent and reflective of small communities. Traditional public schools are often burdened with a bureaucracy that refuses to yield to the values and traditions of small communities.

Charter schools can make small communities come alive. School choice puts control and power back in the hands of parents to decide the proper educational options for their children. Your Montana parents and children deserve the same options; they deserve school choice.

Remember my story of that young boy of 10 who attended the first lottery? The rest of the story is quite powerful. Not only did this child find a school where he could learn and thrive, his family also found success. His grandmother, seeing her grandson read, do homework, and behave, decided to join his success. She began taking literacy classes. She found and was

reunited with the boy's mother, her daughter, and both of them are now doing better. This young boy who was once hated and a failure in life has now become a role model for the rest of his family.

This is the power of school choice. House Bill 603 is a good start toward this positive outcome for Montana families.

Thank you.

This testimony is largely based upon my personal experience drafting, advocating, and implementing one form of school choice, a charter school. In my work at the Foundation for Educational Choice, we support scholarship vouchers, tax credit scholarship programs, charter schools, and all forms of school choice that will empower parents to be the decision-makers regarding the education of their children. A child's educational options should not be limited to whatever school an education monopoly arbitrarily decides based on zip codes or geographic boundaries that have nothing to do with what is in the best interests of the child.

The perfect accompaniment to a vigorous charter school law is a tax credit scholarship program or education voucher. As you see the positive impact of charter schools, I invite you to continue your positive movement and do all that is within your power to offer all possible education options to your Montana children.

I welcome your questions. I may be reached at the following:

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Foundation for Educational Choice

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Subject: FW: Charter School Support
From: Donna Hutchison <dhutchison@connectionsacademy.com>
Date: Wed, 6 Apr 2011 14:47:32 -0400
To: 'Debra Lamm' <dlamm@nellus.com>, 'Gary Matthews' <gmatthews@VictoryMT.com>

Donna

Donna Hutchison, Ph.D.

Vice President State Relations | Connections Academy
www.connectionsacademy.com
208-794-2974 cell

From: Nick Hallett [mailto:nhallett@pmt.org]
Sent: Wednesday, April 06, 2011 12:43 PM
To: Donna Hutchison
Subject: Fwd: Charter School Support

FYI

Nick

----- Original Message -----

Subject: Charter School Support
Date: Wed, 06 Apr 2011 12:41:59 -0600
From: Nick Hallett <nhallett@pmt.org>
To: ryanzinke@yahoo.com, senator.robert.hawks@gmail.com, garybranae@gmail.com,
taylor@northernbroadcasting.com, jessmann@mt.gov, facey_tom@hotmail.com,
lakemill@montana.com, mail@senatorericmoore.com, apsaaloowomen@yahoo.com
CC: dlamm@nellus.com, patwagman@yahoo.com, theresa@theresalode.com

April 5, 2011

Dear Senator Zinke and Members of the Montana Senate Education Committee,

It's my pleasure to provide support for the establishment of charter schools in Montana. As an Idaho resident, I would not presume to know what is best for Montana, but I am an unabashed supporter of school choice and am willing to share my thoughts to help those who are considering the establishment of charter schools.

I am and always will be a strong supporter of public education. I have experience as a classroom teacher, as an elementary and secondary principal, and as a superintendent in both large and small districts in Idaho. I helped to develop a technical charter school in rural Idaho where I served as director/principal. I've also served as a university professor and administrator at the University of Idaho. I am now retired after 49 years in public education, including 4 as a charter school principal/director.

It dismays me to see that many traditional public school educators oppose charter schools. I recognize that charter schools are public schools and I believe that charter schools will strengthen public

schools. Many of my colleagues are current or former public school teachers/coaches. They recognize the need for keen competition for athletics, but they tend to overlook the value of competition in public education. Competition produces excellence in athletics and in the free enterprise system and will serve the same function in K-12 education.

After retiring as a superintendent of a rural school district in South-Central Idaho, I worked with twelve public school districts in Southeast Idaho to develop a technical charter school that provides technical educational opportunities to students from a rural area with small and medium size school districts. The result was ARTEC Regional Professional Technical Charter School. ARTEC RPT Charter School has worked closely with the College of Southern Idaho and with area school districts to improve technical education for high school students. ARTEC RPT Charter School has a very good working relationship with the area school districts and enjoys support from public school superintendents, teachers, and board members.

I currently serve on the Idaho Charter School Commission, a state agency that provides oversight to Idaho Charter Schools. I am very impressed with the effectiveness, dedication, and enthusiasm of Idaho charter school educators and board members. The Commission does hold these charter schools accountable and the schools are open to accountability. I must add a disclaimer that in expressing my views in this document, I do not speak for the Idaho Charter School Commission but express my own personal views.

Charter schools provide innovation, competition, and real choices. One size does not fit all. Charter schools tend to be more accountable than other public schools since they must meet the terms of their respective charters or go out of business.

The virtual charter schools provide opportunities that are often overlooked. I once was a high school principal in a high school with an enrollment of just over 100. Our school could not offer a full curriculum and provided very few electives and technical classes. Today small high schools can partner with virtual charter schools to provide a complete curriculum including honors and dual credit classes.

Charter schools are just one more effective component of school improvement. Traditional schools can partner with charter schools to provide the best education possible and do so in a public setting. It takes some time to build understanding and trust, but I have had the experience to assure you that charter schools can be a positive asset in rural areas with small and medium size school districts. There is no question that charter schools provide enhanced and additional learning opportunities for K-12 students. I encourage all states to seriously consider how charter school development could significantly improve public education.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of additional public school options for students and families. If you would like to know more from my experience, please email me or call me at (208) 436-3794 or cell: 208-312-4236.

Best Regards,

Dr. Nick Hallett
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